

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **20-A**

MIAMI HERALD
11 August 1985

Around the Americas

Costa Rica flashes warning to Managua on skirmishes

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — Angered by a string of border incidents with Nicaragua, traditionally tranquil Costa Rica is warning that it is reaching the end of its patience.

"We're like a beehive," said Minister of Information Armando Vargas. "Everybody works, but the day anyone touches us, we all attack."

The Costa Ricans' sting so far has been more rhetorical than military, befitting a nation that abolished its army in 1948 and adopted a Swiss-style neutrality law two years ago.

Newspapers carry shrill attacks on the Marxist-led Sandinista government, fueling what pollster Miguel Gomez calls "the feeling that something must be done about Nicaragua."

Anti-Communist graffiti is turning up on the walls of the placid capital of San Jose, a startling sight in a region where leftists usually hold the monopoly on spray-can propaganda.

Foreign Minister Carlos Gutierrez has said that he soon will ask the Organization of American States to rush a team of international military observers to the 198-mile frontier.

And President Luis Alberto Monge, who had downplayed some of the incidents as the spillover of the war between Sandinistas and their rebel foes known as contras, accused Nicaragua Aug. 1 of a willful "policy of aggression" against his country.

Vargas said Monge's Cabinet voted the same day to "respond with all possible vigor" to future attacks. "Any aggression will carry a large political price tag... and we will send the bill to Nicaragua," he said.

The warnings took on an ominous tinge after Security Minister Benjamin Piza last week visited military leaders in Venezuela and Panama. The two nations rushed plane loads of military aid to San Jose during a similar border crisis in 1978, when the late President Anastasio Somoza ruled Nicaragua.

Asked if Piza sought military aid, Vargas told The Herald Friday that the minister "simply relayed our growing concern." He added, however: "We're not closing the door on any option."

Venezuela and Panama have been providing some military aid since 1982 to Costa Rica's security forces — 8,000 poorly trained and lightly armed policemen in the civil and rural guards — but the bulk of the guardsmen's foreign support has come from the Reagan

administration.

U.S. military aid to Costa Rica has totaled \$21 million since 1982. Twenty U.S. Special Forces members are now in the country, training about 700 guardsmen in communications and patrol tactics.

The Sandinistas charge that Washington is "militarizing" Costa Rica to increase U.S. pressure on Nicaragua. Yet they say the guardsmen's very weakness makes the border a potential flash point for a U.S. military intervention against Nicaragua.

"Imagine what would happen if we attack poor little Costa Rica," Nicaraguan Defense Ministry spokeswoman Capt. Rosa Pasos said earlier this year. "That's why our troops are under strict orders to respect the border."

Orders or not, Costa Rica's Vargas said, Sandinista forces have staged 34 "major" border raids since late 1983, including an attack in May that killed two guardsmen and wounded nine

others. The latest incident was a July 26 rocket attack by four Nicaraguan warplanes against a civil guard outpost 7½ miles south of the border, he said.

Nicaragua has denied responsibility for the attacks, usually blaming them on anti-Sandinista guerrillas bent on provoking a U.S. military intervention.

And the Sandinistas have hinted that the CIA is behind the campaign by San Jose's newspapers, traditionally among the most respected in Central America, to beat the drums of war.

Vargas said he had no information on the charge but added, "We don't doubt all kinds of secret services are taking advantage of the Central American tragedy, not only the CIA, but also the [Soviets'] KGB."

One ranking government official noted, however, that President Monge's 1983 declaration of Costa Rican neutrality was "a tactic to

shield us from U.S. efforts to persuade us to take sides in Central American conflict."

If the CIA is behind the campaign, it would be an agency triumph. Public opinion polls show that 83 percent of Costa Rica's 2.5 million people view the Sandinistas as Communists who threaten their country.

An official at the U.S. Embassy, expanded from 35 to 150 American staffers since mid-1983, said the mission has a legitimate duty to make U.S. policies known in Costa Rica.

"We try to make the U.S. point of view known to journalists here," he said, "but as to whether the United States is developing a frenzy against the Sandinistas, that's not true [because] the people here are smart enough to develop their own views of the Sandinistas."

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The Miami Herald

The official said he recently mailed copies of a speech by a Sandinista leader, questioning the value of Western-style elections, to 150 journalists, politicians, businessmen and youth leaders. Two days later, two newspapers published editorials on the speech, first reported by The Herald in mid-June.

One ranking Costa Rican official said the anti-Sandinista uproar was stoked by newspapers whose conservative owners include rich coffee and sugar growers and industrialists.

"I don't believe it's been necessary for the newspapers to heat up the situation," said Guido Fernandez, former editor of the leading La Nacion newspaper. "The situation has heated up because of the facts, and the newspapers have only mirrored this."

Fernandez and pollster Miguel Gomez stressed that Costa Ricans have their own reasons to criticize Nicaragua and need little egging on from the outside.

Nicaragua and Costa Rica fought brief border clashes in 1949 and 1955, and Somoza threatened to invade this country in 1978 in pursuit of Sandinista guerrillas then based in Costa Rica.

Most Costa Ricans enthusiastically supported the Sandinista-led revolution that toppled Somoza in 1979. They shifted when the Sandinistas broke their promises of democracy and turned toward a Nicaraguan mutation of Marxism.

Vargas said the traditional enmity between the two neighbors was best described in 1910 by Costa Rican President Ricardo Jimenez.

"Costa Rica has three seasons," the president is supposed to have said. "Rainy, dry, and conflict with Nicaragua."